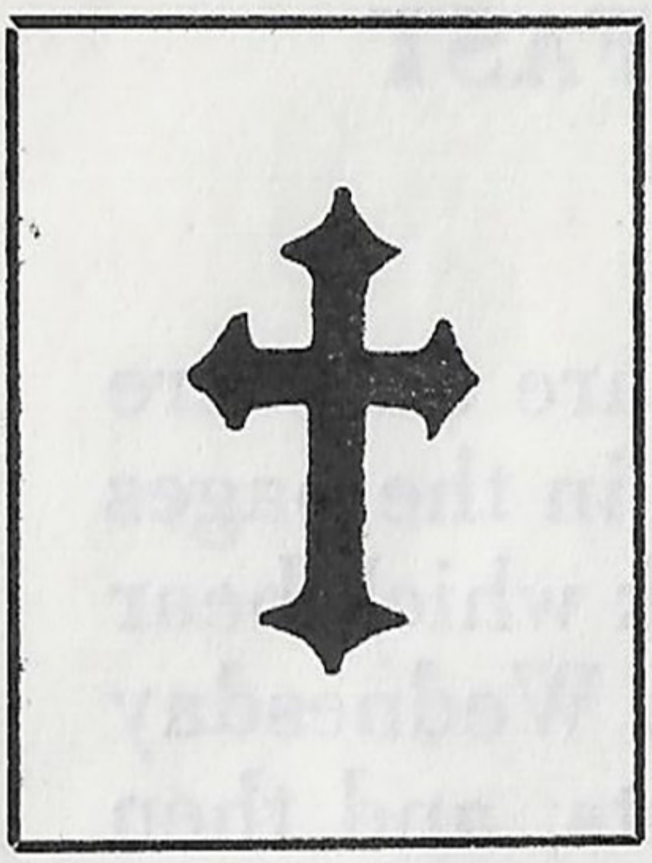

"Then shall they fast in those days"

(St. Luke V : 33-35)

By **EDWARD N. PERKINS**

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A NATIONAL GUILD OF CHURCHMEN TRACT

"THEN SHALL THEY FAST IN THOSE DAYS"

It seems that many Episcopalians are unaware of the presence of a Table of Fasts in the pages at the beginning of the Prayer Book which bear the Roman numerals. It names Ash Wednesday and Good Friday as the great fasts, and then names "other days of fasting, on which the Church requires such a measure of abstinence as is more especially suited to extraordinary [more than ordinary] acts and exercises of devotion." These other days are the forty days of Lent, the Ember Days, and All Fridays in the year except Christmas and the Epiphany or any Friday which may fall between the two; and perhaps the Rogation Days, though this seems to be expressed ambiguously.

"Requires" is a strong word. This fasting and abstinence are what the Church *requires*. Not very many Episcopalians attend to what the Church *requires*.

Perhaps a good many Episcopalians think of refraining from meat on Fridays as a bit of Roman Catholic regimentation. However, the Roman Catholics have been brought up to reverence the Church, and so they very generally respect and adhere to the standards of the Church.

It should be observed that it is not a mere "fish on Fridays" rule that the Church requires. Besides Fridays, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday especially, and all the forty days of Lent, and the Ember Days, twelve in all, are listed. The sum of these days of fasting and abstinence is at least eighty-nine, comprising the forty days of Lent and forty-three Fridays

which are neither Ember Fridays nor Fridays falling on Christmas or the Epiphany or between the two nor Fridays falling in Lent, and also six Ember Days which are neither Fridays nor in Lent. Thus nearly 25% of the year, all but a quarter, is devoted to "such a measure of abstinence as is more especially suited to extraordinary acts and exercises of devotion" (Prayer Book, Table of Fasts).

In view of what the Prayer Book enjoins (and it is only the established rule of the Holy Catholic Church), the practice of fasting and of the Friday abstinence is an act of obedience. Those who truly reverence the Church obey the Church. It is also much more. It is of the nature of an ascesis, a systematic training for spiritual stamina, much as the athlete trains for the cultivation of physical stamina. St. Paul likens the life of a Christian to one who competes in a race. "So run that ye may obtain [the prize]," he says; and, "every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things." (I Cor. ix. See Prayer Book, p. 119, Septuagesima).

Fasting was well known to the Jews. Our Lord refers to it. He says: "But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly." (St. Matthew vi. See Prayer Book, p. 125, Ash Wednesday). He assumes that we shall fast.

Fasting was the way of the great prophets. And we know how ascetic was St. John the Baptist, living by what he could pick up in the wilderness. "And John was clothed with cam-

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a virtue. Yet without rules to conform to, it is not possible for us to act as one in a common practice.

We have a liturgical worship and a common practice because we are of the Church, and in the Church are one. Our Lord did not teach us to say "*My* Father who art in heaven" or "Give *me* this day *my* daily bread," and He prayed that we may all be one (St. John xvii: 21). Rules help us to conform together. So the rule of each should be the rule of all. In this way only can we practice fasting and abstinence in common, as one and incorporate in the mystical body of our Lord (Cf. Prayer Book, at page 83).

Besides being a systematic training for spiritual stamina comparable to an athlete's training for physical stamina, the practice of fasting and abstinence under common rule assumes a liturgical character, commemorative and designed for our better observance of events peculiar to our Christian tradition.

Friday is the day of the crucifixion. Formerly it was a real fast. The general dispensation to indulge in fish was a relaxation of the Middle Age designed to rectify a depressed state of the fishing industry. Fridays have been set apart for fasting from the earliest times for the reason that our Lord was crucified on that day. And Lent not only is reminiscent of our Lord's fast of forty days in the wilderness, but it ends at Easter because it grew out of the rigid paschal fast immediately preceding Easter, including the anniverary of the crucifixion.

In the second and third centuries, as we learn from an article in "The Living Church"

of February 9th, 1958, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays were fasts. "Wednesday was kept as the day of the Jews' conspiracy against Jesus **; Friday as a weekly 'Good Friday' in commemoration of the crucifixion; Saturday as a weekly 'Easter Even' in commemoration of the entombment and as a preparation for Sunday, the weekly 'Easter'." The Ember days at the four seasons (See Prayer Book, Table of Fasts), always a Wednesday, a Friday, and a Saturday, are reminiscent of the ancient weekly fast on those three days.

We in the Episcopal Church are enabled, if we will, to practice fasting and abstinence together as true members of one body, the Church, because the Church in the Table of Fasts in the Prayer Book prescribes the common times. Here precision ends. We are given definite times, but as to how we are to fast the Prayer Book says nothing more than that we shall practice "such a measure of abstinence as is more especially suited to extraordinary acts and exercises of devotion."

This would do very well by itself if we were all disposed to fast rigidly. But the fact is that most of us are not distinguished by enthusiasm for self-denial. As soon as we hear that we should curb our appetites, we wish to know how much curbing we must do to get by, and if we are not given a measure, we are likely to do no curbing at all, as is the case with most Episcopalians with respect to Fridays. Rules as to fasting, and as to some other matters also, are minimum rules. Abstention from fish as well as from meat on Fridays would be commendable, but is not required. We require a minimum definite rule if we are to do anything

at all, and one which most people will not find it too difficult to conform to.

One of our peculiarities is the quite common notion that if a practice resembles Roman practice those who practice it are "aping Rome," which is supposed to be a contemptible thing to do. But that is not really the case. Our Church is not a creature of the Reformation. The Reformation purged it of racketeering and some other abuses and robbed it of some good things. That does not change its identity. Anyone who will compare carefully pages 67 to 262 of the Prayer Book with the contents of a Roman missal will see that they are essentially the same thing. The reason is, that we are as truly the heir of the pre-reformation Church as the Gallican or any other Roman Catholic Church is, or the Roman diocese itself. Ours is not an imitation of the Roman Mass. We did not come at it by "aping Rome." The Catholic practices of fasting and abstinence also existed long before the Reformation and were and are the property of our Church. Only, since the Reformation, and not because of it, we have let them fall largely into desuetude, as we have some other things.

The old Catholic practices of fasting are ours, so we have no need for "aping Rome." All we need is to know what the rules are, so that we may have a common rule of minimum practice to go by. And we should remember that the Roman Catholic people are as truly as we very members incorporate in the mystical body of Christ (Cf. Prayer Book at p. 83). If our rules for the practice of abstinence largely coincide with theirs, then that blessed company

of the faithful (Cf. ibid.) is by so much the more acting in unison.

Our Lenten practice calls for fasting. On none of the forty days should more than a few morsels of solid food be taken for breakfast, such as a little toast or a muffin; and lunch will be light, only one dish. On Wednesdays as well as on Fridays, and on the Ember Saturday in Lent, no meat will be taken but fish is permitted. On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday breakfast will be abstained from except for tea or coffee and if anything is eaten at midday it will be but a bite. These suggestions are really but a way of applying the general rule, that on days of fasting not more than two full meals shall be taken in all.

Ember Days occur at three seasons outside of Lent (See Prayer Book, Table of Fasts, for identification of the seasons). The rule for those days is the same as for Fridays in Lent, that is, abstention altogether from meat but fish is permitted. Some critics will say that fish on Fridays is all right for Roman Catholics, but the Prayer Book says nothing about fish. Very well. Let them abstain from fish as well as from meat.

The rigour of these rules is abated for young children and old people, for people in poor health, and for people working hard.

In looking at the Table of Fasts in the Prayer Book, we should mentally look through it to the canons and tradition of the Catholic Church from which it is derived and which belong to us inasmuch as we belong to the Catholic Church of the ages.

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